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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the characteristics of middle school students and teachers, and provides suggestions for the development of cultural awareness at the middle school level. Between the ages of 10 and 14 years, adolescents experience rapid physical growth, changes in social relationships and in emotions, and changes in intellectual development from concrete to abstract operations. Middle school educators must keep these changes in mind if they are to provide a high quality educational environment. Cultural awareness education programs should increase students' knowledge of cultures and minority groups, and minimize students' prejudice toward others who are different. A cultural awareness program should include: (1) an interdisciplinary approach; (2) interesting curricular materials; (3) development of skills in analysis and critical thinking; and (4) materials and activities which are authentic and multidimensional, and involve cognitive and affective skills. A reference list of 22 items is provided. (BC)

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Our Shrinking World: The Need for Cultural Awareness

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of ACEI, San Diego

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Our Shrinking World: The Need for Cultural Awareness

"Our world is not growing smaller—it's growing closer" these words are heard daily in thousands of homes as the evening news is being advertised, yet often we do not stop to think about the implications this has for us as teachers, parents, or anyone who attempts to help the early adolescent portion of our society learn. The students we are helping to learn are tomorrows future. The primary purpose of this paper is to discuss the rationale of and provide suggestions for development of cultural awareness at the middle school level.

Characteristics of Middle School Students and Teachers

The term "adolescence" is derived from a Greek term which means "to grow up." The term transescent was coined by Eichhorn to describe the group of early adolescents between the ages of ten and fourteen (Eichhorn, 1966). Other than the stage of life between zero and two years of age, the greatest amount of physical growth occurs during the transescent period. The major difference between these two stages is that the transescent is aware of the changes.

Changes that take place during the transescent period include biological, social emotional, and intellectual development. The most significant and evident changes are those related to the rapid physical growth and development. Increases in height, weight,

and muscular strength occur at a swift rate; therefore, many transescents have problems with coordination and are labeled as awkward. The change in the rate of metabolism causes differing levels of energy which vary from great activity to need for rest. During the period between the ages of ten and fourteen, sexual maturation causes the transescents a great deal of self-consciousness about their bodies. According to research, some patterns developed during this self-conscious age have lasting effects into adulthood (Eichhorn, 1966; Drash, 1980).

The problems and distress for transescents related to their biological development is often made more complex by the changes in their social relationships. Friendships are of extreme importance during the stage. According to Manning, transescents need for belonging and acceptance is heightened (Manning, 1989). Transescents, while at times quite egocentric, are extremely concerned with the development of acceptance by peers. This can lead to the development of a "personal fable" in which the transescent is the most important part of his world which is made up, to a great extent by peers (Elkind, 1967).

The rapid rate of emotional change in the transescent stage of life has been the topic of a number of research efforts (Hill, 1980; Dorman and Lipsitz, 1981; Elkind, 1967). Extreme emotions are noticeable to anyone who lives or works with this age group. The display of emotion is directly related to the biological changes occurring during this period. The major changes taking place during the emotional growth and

development lead the transescent to alter self-concepts (Clark and Clark, 1987). Positive emotional growth needs to be encouraged through a supportive environment.

Intellectual development is directly related to all other aspects of growth for the transescent. The ability to think about thinking is a characteristic of this age group. The intellectual change from the concrete to formal or abstract may occur at different times for different students (Epstein and Toepfer, 1978; Strahon and Toepfer, 1984). Careful planning in teaching strategies must be utilized to provide this unique group of students with opportunities for learning.

The physical, emotional, and intellectual characteristics of transescents have significant implications for educators. According to Popejoy, the middle school level is different from elementary and high school (Popejoy, 1980). The most successful middle schools are those which are willing to adapt school practices to meet the individual differences of students (Lipsitz, 1984). The perceptions teachers have about the students in this age group have a major impact on the teaching as well as learning process (Manning, 1989). Good middle-school teachers familiarize themselves with their students and plan teaching strategies which will enable students to move forward to their learning potential (George, 1988). It is imperative that the middle school educator understand the diversity of students and feel at ease in working on a daily basis with the changing needs and energy required to provide a quality educational environment.

Cultural Awareness

Until recently, cultural awareness focused primarily on ethnic groups within one society. But rapidly increasing interdependence among all the nations on Earth, particularly as they face global issues related to the ecosystem, nuclear weapons, human rights, and scarce natural resources, has broadened the scope of cultural awareness to include global perspectives. Cultural awareness education is basically an approach to teaching and learning that is based upon democratic values and beliefs, and seeks to foster cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies and an interdependent world.

Though definitions of cultural awareness may vary, the basic components of any program will likely include the following:

- knowledge of cultures and subcultures with emphasis on significant minority groups
- awareness of how specific cultures shape student responses to schooling
- minimizing prejudice and maximizing tolerance for different others (Tesconi, 1984).

Educators who work daily with early adolescents (10-14) face a great challenge in the area of cultural differences. For early adolescents, perceptions of cultural differences and their opinions of others' perceptions play a significant role in their degree of self-worth and self-image. Students who differ culturally from the teacher often begin to consider "differences" as inferior. It is imperative that educators recognize the consequences such feelings can have on early adolescents' sense of

personal worth. Rather than considering cultural differences as additional hurdles to be overcome, educators should understand the richness that cultural diversity offers and provide experiences which will develop an understanding by students.

In order to provide appropriate cultural awareness education, more than simply teaching cultural information about various cultural/ethnic groups is required. Several basic components are needed to promote effective understanding of various cultures.

First, cultural awareness should be addressed through an interdisciplinary approach integrated into the total program. Second, appropriate curricular materials are needed to maintain interest in classroom learning. Students need to be provided with vocabulary for understanding, examples, and models with which they can relate (Grand & Sleeter, 1985). Third, major curricular focuses should include skills in analysis and critical thinking (Grant and Sleeter, 1985). Fourth, materials, activities, and experiences should be designed to help students understand cultural diversity by being authentic, multidimensional, and include both cognitive and affective skills (Gay, 1975).

Educators planning to implement programs to increase cultural awareness should be aware of the total involvement needed for a successful program. Fragmented attempts often lead to development of further misunderstanding by using inadequate teaching efforts. Stereotypical activities such as "pizza, piñata, polka potpourri" (DeCosta, 1984) only hamper development of true cultural awareness for students at the middle school level.

During this period of development, early adolescent students need educational experiences which demonstrate respect for both individuals and their cultures. As leaders of tomorrow, in an ever shrinking world, it is imperative that students be provided with the environment that will lead to a better understanding of the role they have in a world of diverse cultures.

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